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ABSTRACT

In Western societies, television has transformed the life, culture, and points of reference of the child. Its particular sphere of influence is the child's play culture. This play culture is not hermetic: it is very oriented toward manipulation; has a symbolic role as a representational medium; evolves along with the child; has a certain amount of autonomy; and is stratified, compartmentalized, and absorbed into the general culture which the child belongs to. Television provides children with material for games through its fictional inventions and the diverse images it presents. Television has become the main supplier of play material. In no way does television stand in the way of play. Instead, it fosters, influences, and structures play. At the same time, play allows the child to adapt certain television material to his or her own requirements. Children's games are partly determined by the objects children have at their disposal. Through commercials, the child discovers both play objects and play situations. The development of television commercials has therefore considerably influenced the development of toys. This does not mean that the child's play culture is wholly determined by television. There is no apparent contradiction between traditional games and those provided by television. (RH)

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PLAY, TOYS AND TELEVISION

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Whether we deplore it, whether we resign ourselves to it or whether we accept it with enthusiasm, the mass media play an important role in Western society for both adults and children alike. As far as children are concerned, this has led to endless debate which we do not intend to enter into here. All we wish to do is try to discover the many effects this has on young children's play and the toys they choose, without in any way expressing a value-judgement. It is true that our culture, and perhaps even more so that of young children, has become part of the mass media, especially that which seems to rule supreme i.e. television. Television has transformed the life, culture and points of reference of the child. Its particular sphere of influence is his play culture.

By this expression I mean a complex hierarchically organized structure made up of games which, to name but a few, are learned, accessible, and of long-standing, as well as having game structures which can be individual, of times gone by, universal(if that means anything), generational(belonging to one generation), while at the same time being part of a context with its own particular objects and especially today its own particular toys (or as G. REDDE puts it the toy aggregate which is considered as an organized whole [1]).

This play culture is not hermetic, it is open to all the external elements which contribute to play, such as aptitudes and capabilities, culture and social background. Toys fit into this context. In order to become a true object for play, this object must find its place, make a niche for itself in the play culture of the child. The toy is then taken over by this culture.

Obviously our play culture today is very much manipulation-oriented; there is no doubt this is an essential aspect. As a result it evolves partly through the impetus given it by the new toys which appear on the market. New operations are called for (one only has to consider electronic and computer games), along with new game structures, or perhaps the development of some structures to the detriment of others. There are new representations. Hence the toy helps contribute to the development of the play culture. Yet the toy finds its way into play by means of adaption i.e. by being taken over by the receptive play culture, by the investment of earlier play practices.

This play culture is not only made up of structures involving play activities, and potentially realizable manipulations, but it also has a symbolic role, as a representational medium. Play is just as much imagination, tales and stories. The toy itself serves as a basis for representations

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and stories, whether specific to itself or resulting from other sources (such as books, films or cartoons).

It goes without saying that the play culture evolves along with the child, being partly determined by his psychological capacities. However, these capacities can only help or hinder certain actions or representations. They are basic requirements but are not sufficient in themselves.

The play culture has a certain amount of autonomy, it has its own tempo, yet it can only be thought of in conjunction with the overall culture of the society in question. From this society it receives its structures while at the same time providing them with a character all their own. The same is true for the differences between the sexes which stem from society, but which take on specific characteristics within the play culture itself. Indeed this culture differentiates between the sexes, the generations, even the ages, social backgrounds, nations and regions.

At the same time this play culture is stratified, compartmentalized, in so far as it does not always manifest itself in the same way in every play situation. The child does not, for example, use the same elements of his play culture when he is at school as when he is at home. Indeed if one refers to WINNICOTT's work, it is possible to anticipate that this play culture will shape the child's cultural acquisitions and will blend in in a positive way with the culture and the capacity for creation of the adult-to-be.

The play culture is absorbed into the general culture that the child belongs to. It borrows elements from this picture-book of images which is nothing less than society in its entirety; one only has to think of the part played by imitation in play. The play culture also takes over elements invented by the television, which is so liberal in supplying images of all kinds. It would be hard to believe that the play of young children is not fostered by television and all that goes with it. We are now going to try to analyse in greater detail the diverse contributions made by television not only to children's games, but also to the play culture of the present day.

1 - The direct influence exerted by television on children's games

By means of its fictional inventions and the diverse images it presents, television provides children with the material for their games. Through play they take on the characters seen on television. It is in this way that the reshowing of Zorro on French television has led huge numbers of children to integrate this fictional character into their play. However, it is not sufficient just to show these pictures on the television, nor even for them to appeal, for them to be the source of games; they have to fit in with the play world of the child, with the structures which this play culture we have

already referred to is built on. This material has to fit in with the play system, which is less susceptible to change than the form it takes. Fighting, encountering danger, helping others, imitating certain scenes from everyday life (such as preparing meals, looking after the baby, shopping) are typical examples of such structures which can easily be adapted to new contexts.

Television exerts a very real influence on games in as much as the themes offered can be applied by children within the framework of the structure of ordinary everyday games. Not everything lends itself to play! Play is far from being just a slavish imitation of what has been seen on the television, but rather a series of images which have the advantage of being well-known by all or nearly all the children who in turn combine, make use of, and modify them within the framework of a play structure. This is a good example of the two dimensional nature of play. Its basic structure is subject to diverse new forms which grow out of it, reviving it, bringing new life to it. The effects of fads or passing fancies are far more likely to involve this second dimension.

Admittedly television does not just offer new material for play structures, for by means of the coverage it gives to sport it also promotes play structures that children can pick up and adapt to the specific circumstances of the playground or the street.

In any case, it has become the main if not the sole supplier of play material, a fact which can only strengthen its presence in the life of the child. Indeed the child does not stop at the passive reception of this material for he reactivates it and adapts it through his games, in exactly the same way as social and family roles are adapted in games of impersonation. The great advantage television has to offer children is to be able to provide youngsters from many different backgrounds with a common language and a single set of references. One only has to mention any cartoon hero for children to immediately enter into the game, adapting their behaviour to that of the others and using what they know of the series in question. In a society which is witnessing the fragmentation of cultural circles, television offers a common set of references, and the material for communication. Wouldn't one be right in saying that its role is similar to that played by this same television medium in providing commonplace subjects of conversation for adults?

In her work Liliane LURÇAT stresses the emotional discharge, the outlet which is provided by collective play where children act out scenes seen on television. She writes,"Experiences obtained through television have their impact reduced in this way, for it is as though there was a discharge of the television impregnation in the outlet which is provided by play.(...)Collective play (...) enables children to eliminate the effects

of the emotional bombardment that they are subject to while watching certain programmes on their own." [2]

The recent development of toys which serve to strengthen the importance of television in play must also be brought up here. In fact a great number of manufacturers produce toys today which are related to cartoon characters. Obviously this can be seen as no more than an opportune commercial venture. However, the effect is similar to that already mentioned, but in addition, suiting solitary play, it enables the child to go from being a passive television spectator to an active participant in a situation involving manipulation and possibly (re)creation. It enables a group of children to enter into the game thanks to this common set of references but without putting themselves in a situation whereby they identify themselves physically with a character, in spite of all that. We have carried out an experiment in some nursery school classes in France using the Masters of the Universe series. The energy invested by the children in the game was directly proportionate to the knowledge they had of the characters as seen on television, and this would seem to make it possible for primary school teachers to introduce television material into the classroom.[3] While bringing about an emotional discharge, just as in collective play, this situation also seems to allow the child to establish a gap between himself and the characters and situations so in most cases enabling him to dominate them, stage them, bring them under his control rather than identify with them.

Even if certain writers may have referred to the question of the rival demands made by television and play on the child's free time, the child himself has had no difficulty at all in adapting in his play the images offered him by the television screen. In no way does television stand in the way of play. Instead it fosters it, influences it, structures it in so far as play must have a source and what better one than those things the child is continually confronted with. At the same time, play allows the child to adapt certain television material to his own requirements

2 - <u>The indirect influence : toys</u>

We have already indicated how much toys influence and structure the play culture of the child, whether it be on a behaviour level or on a symbolic level involving the materials used. Children's games are partly determined by the objects they have at their disposal. In fact, these days, at least in those countries which allow toy advertising on television, the toys which are most successful commercially are in most cases those which have been advertised on television.

Through the commercials which are so popular with children, the child discovers both play objects, and also play situations presenting the staging of the toys being promoted. Television not only influences the toy's image and its function but also boosts the sales of certain toys.

However, to take full account of the role played by television, one has to go back to the influence it exerts directly. Indeed the need to promote a toy by means of television imposes certain restrictions on the nature of the toy itself. It must, for example, be capable of being communicated i.e. it can be explained and made attractive in very short sequences. It must be the only one of its kind i.e. it cannot be likened to any other toy, therefore as far as its characteristic appearance is concerned it must be linked to a range of products or a universe in such a way as to make advertising profitable for a multiplicity of objects.

The development of television commercials has therefore considerably influenced the toy. As a result it is more and more bound up with a story (such is the case of the new fluffy toys which have come out in recent years), it is personified, often by means of a cartoon, and what is more it is linked to a universe. All in all, its symbolic dimension i.e. its representative material has taken on more and more importance, especially as television can easily give it prominence. We have before us an indivisible toy/television unit. With the toy, just as with television, the child can see how his play can be filled with new constituents, new material which he will manipulate, transform, respect or adapt to his own needs. As with television material, fashion crazes and fads punctuate the existence of any toy.

Whether it be directly through the showing of programmes or indirectly through the toys which have been adapted to its system, television intervenes very considerably in a child's play, in his play culture. I do not know if this is to be deplored. One is however obliged to draw attention to it and to examine it in detail.

This does not mean that the child's play culture is wholly dominated by the influence of television. On the one hand certain games are totally unaffected by it, but on the other hand even in those games where the influence of television is most evident, this influence is not exclusive. In fact there is a sort of osmosis between television material and earlier game structures; such is the case of the fighting and conflict structures which form the basis of many games and which have no need to refer to television for their organization. Television only provides new material for these structures, even long-standing stereotypes.

The play culture is impregnated with traditions which are many and varied : there are the traditional games in the strict sense of the word, but even more important perhaps are the structures of reactivated games, the elements, themes and material linked to the handing down of children's play or the imitation of their peers or elders. New material, in particular that taken from the television, that most important source of the imaginary, comes and attaches itself to these earlier structures which are accessible

and have been acquired by the children. To some extent the forms of the most recent games reactivate those game structures which have been part of a permanent core of the play culture, for at least several generations.

There seems to be no contradiction between traditional games and those provided by television, at least as far as the games are concerned which make up the living culture of the child. Play, among other things, provides the child with the means of experiencing the culture which surrounds him as it is in actual fact and not as it should be.

As regards the education of the young child, play which is linked to the television can enable him to distance himself from, even be discriminating towards, certain television material. We think it would be possible here to devise a means of educating the young viewer by play. In short we have seen how play not only allows the discharge of the emotions that build up during viewing, but also enables the child to distance himself from the situations and characters,while still making it possible for him to invent and create new situations around the images he has seen.

NOTES

1. G. RODDE, L'enfant et les jouets, 3 vol, Thèse, Bordeaux II, 1984

2. L. LURÇAT, Le jeune enfant devant les apparences télévisuelles, Paris 1984

3 G. BROUGÈRE, "Jouer avec des figurines d'école maternelle" in International Journal of Early Childhood, Vol 19, No 1 - 1987 - p 34-42